

## Inside the secret garden of political parties.

### Transformations and reactions to primary elections in Italy and France

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#### Abstract:

Primary elections are becoming quite spread within no-US political context. Many political parties in different countries choose to adopt such inclusive methods to select their candidates for general elections. Thus, primary elections have been re-adapted to different political systems, in order to fit with different party's specific features. This implied a re-definition of the very concept of primary both in terms of procedures and in terms of political meaning. This paper aims to understand the promotion of party primaries in two EU countries: Italy and France. The two countries have implemented open primaries adopting the maximum level of inclusiveness. This paper will focus on the public debate about these two case studies in order to clarify which were the meaning and the political value of the primary contests in 2011 (France) and 2012 (Italy).

**Keywords:** Candidate Selections, Political Parties, Public Debate, Italian Politics, French Politics, Media, Political Participation, Elections, Legitimation.

## 1. Introduction: Why studying primaries?

United States could be considered as the birthplace of primary elections (Ware 2002), even though, within the States, it is possible to find a wide variety of systems and procedures, which overall make it difficult to find an ideal type of primary election. But primary elections are becoming widely common even beyond the USA: In Latin America (Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006), in Asia (Narita *et al.* 2013), Israel (Rahat and Sher-Hadar 1999; Hazan 1996) and, of course, in the Old Continent. In Europe, primary elections are quite common in Belgium (Wauters 2009), where many parties use this type of inclusive process. This trend can also be observed in Iceland (Indriðason and Kristinsson 2013), Spain and Portugal (Barbera, Lisi and Rodriguez-Teruel 2013), Great Britain (Hopkin 2001) – where these inclusive procedures have been adopted for many years – and of course in Italy (Pasquino and Venturino 2010) and France (Lefebvre 2011; De Luca 2011; De Luca and Venturino 2013).

Understanding these vast spreads of primary elections (Hazan and Rahat 2010) and inclusive procedures for leader selection (Cross and Pilet 2013) requires studying political parties and their organizational evolution in depth. Indeed, such inclusive procedures recently promoted by political parties could be interpreted as adaptive strategies implemented by political parties in order to face the crisis of legitimacy. Nowadays political parties are at the centre of a wide and deep feeling of anti-politics. As underlined by Ignazi (2014) the reasons for their bad reputation is related to their detachment from society. When compared to mass parties as described by Duverger (1961) or Neumann (1953), they have little in common. Parties are less linked to their grassroots, less on the ground, to use Katz and Mair's words (1995), and much more tied into public office. Their attempt in reacting to the difficulties by focusing on gaining sources of sustenance from society by developing their government roles produces a gap between them and their supporters. This redefinition of their bureaucratic organizations has reshaped, in general, the relationship between the parties and their supporters. In this day and age, political parties need other tools to regain the support of citizens. In this sense, the increasing diffusion of inclusive procedures on party's internal decisions could be interpreted as a change in the mobilization strategies adopted by political parties in contemporary democracies (Cross and Katz 2013).

Primary elections can be interpreted as a reaction to the challenges related to antiparty feelings (Bardi 1996; Poguntke 1996; Poguntke and Scarrow 1996), to a considerable decrease in turnout and membership levels (van Biezen and Poguntke 2014; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012; van Biezen and Mair 2001; Dalton and Watterberg 2000) and in order to promote a new public image of the parties among members and supporters (Dalton and Weldon 2004). In other words, primaries could be seen as a tool of participation aimed to promote a new party's image, much more transparent, democratic and inclusive. These elections are related to the concept of inclusiveness (Hazan 2002; Rahat and Hazan 2001). Indeed, such decision processes involve a wider electorate in order to redefine the relationship with members – offering them a new participative opportunity – and with supporters – offering them the possibility to participate regardless of their formal enrolment in party life (Hopkin 2001; Seddone and Venturino 2013). The impact of primary elections, especially on the electoral party's performances and on the power of the party in gaining new supporters, is related to the idea of internal democracy.

Obviously there is widely available US literature dealing with these topics often focuses on differences between selectors and electors (Kaufmann *et al.* 2003), or on how the primary campaign and its negativity could affect the party performances during general elections (Djupe and Peterson 2002; Peterson and Djupe 2005). And it is developing a growing interest by European scholars on primary elections and their role within the European countries. Gallagher and Marsh (1988) proposed a comparative analysis about the 'secret garden' of political parties, focusing on the process of candidate election. Over the last few years, this issue has been in the middle of all debates within European parties and it seems that the analytical framework, the topics and analytical strategies – originally developed in the USA - are no longer sufficient to understand the real impact of primary elections (Sandri and Seddone 2012).

What still lacks in the European approach to primary elections studies relates to the consequences on public debate of such inclusive procedures. In particular, there is the need to understand what the meaning

of primaries is within the public debate. Which are the main dimensions through which public debate focuses in order to interpret these new procedures?

There are at least three dimensions on which it could be worthwhile to focus on.

The first deals with the idea of the inclusiveness of primary elections, which could be a very powerful tool to mobilize public opinion in favour of the party that is promoting primaries (Le Duc 2001). Primary elections are often associated with the idea of the democratization of the party's internal life, a change from the 'secret garden of politics'. This inclusiveness could obviously promote a new public image giving them the ability to deal with anti-political feelings and reinforce the party's role within the representative system.

The second instead relates to the personalization of politics. As underlined by Katz and Mair (1995), inclusiveness in primaries also means a direct link between leaders and selectors as well as between candidates and selectors. Leaders or candidates selected by these procedures derive their legitimacy and power from external resources (i.e. selectors) which could bring about a reinforcement of the personalization of political parties.

The third regards the potential impact of primaries on the party's performance during general elections. Primary elections allow parties to anticipate the election campaign, by occupying the public debate and catching media attention. This could be a strategy awarely played by parties so as to maximize their possibilities of winning general elections by taking advantage of the idea of an electoral-boost from the primary elections campaign.

## **2. Italy and France: a new European way to the primary elections?**

Italian and French primaries are very interesting cases within the European experience of primary elections. They stand out among the European parties. Indeed, compared to other European experiences, in Italy and France the parties which have promoted primary elections, have adopted the maximum level of inclusiveness, just as in the US primaries. This peculiarity makes it very interesting to focus research on these two case studies, also because their choices are in some way having an effect on other political parties across Europe<sup>1</sup>.

In the Italian case, the participation in primary elections is granted to all citizens, regardless of any formal party enrolment. Initially starting with, albeit quite rare, local experiments at municipal and regional levels – such as Apulia's primaries in 2005 – primaries then spread to national level. But, as it is quite obvious the public debate has been mostly focused at the national level. From this point of view, the 2005 primaries held by the centre-left coalition 'Unione' to select the Prime Minister candidate and the 2012 primaries of the 'Italia Bene Comune' coalition were a turning point.

The French experience is quite different. For a while most of the parties that hold primary elections have reserved the participation only for their members (UMP, Union pour un Mouvement Populaire – Union for a Popular Movement – in 2007 and 2012, PS, Parti Socialiste – Socialist Party – in 1995 and 2007). However, in 2011 the organization of open primaries by the PS, in partnership with the Left Radical Party, opened up

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the recent discussion within the Labour Party after the statements made by the leader Ed Miliband about a plan of reorganization of the party illustrates this evolution. In particular, the leader stressed the need to rethink the role of unions within the party. At the same time, Miliband announced the intention to resort to open primaries for the selection of the mayoral candidate on the occasion of London's municipal elections ([www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jul/09/labour-unions-ed-miliband-editorial](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jul/09/labour-unions-ed-miliband-editorial)). On the Spanish side, however, the discussion around the primaries is more complex as it involves local structures of political parties. In early summer 2013, a hard discussion was opened up based on the hypothesis of open primaries in Andalusia. Even if the final decision was not to proceed with an open primary, the debate within the PSOE has not ended yet ([elpais.com/elpais/2013/07/21/opinion/1374422369\\_808460.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/07/21/opinion/1374422369_808460.html)). The Catalan Socialists are holding primaries to select the mayoral candidate for Barcelona next year: [www.primariesobertes2015.cat](http://www.primariesobertes2015.cat). Looking to France and Italy could allow the understanding of some of the many crucial developments occurring in European parties. They seem, in some way, to anticipate a general trend and allow the in depth analyse of this process both at organizational and systemic level.

a new phase for primaries in France. This was the first time that a presidential candidate was chosen with this system, which was similar to that adopted in Italy.

France and Italy represent a laboratory not only for political experimentation, but also for the international scientific community involved in these questions. However, little attention has been devoted so far to the comparison of primaries between the two countries. Major studies have indeed addressed the issue from a national perspective. In Italy, the research group "Candidate and Leader Selection" focused on the participation (De Luca and Venturino 2010; Pasquino and Venturino 2010; Venturino 2007; Diamanti and Bordinon 2006), communication (Bobba, Rombi and Seddone 2012; De Luca, Vicentini and Seddone 2013) and the organisational dimension (Bernardi and Valbruzzi 2012), analysing not only the national but also the primary consultations held locally (Seddone and Valbruzzi 2012; Pasquino and Venturino 2009). In France, the issue has been the subject of some scientific interest ever since the primaries nominated Ségolène Royal as candidate in the presidential election of 2007 (Dolez and Laurent 2007; Dupoirier 2007). However with the exception of the book by Rémy Lefebvre (2011), and another explorative study on participation (De Luca 2011), research entirely devoted to understanding this phenomenon is lacking.

### 3. Research design and methodology

The main aim of this paper is to understand the role played by primary elections in defining new political balances and the climate of opinion in which the subsequent general election were held. In particular, we need to better clarify whether these two national experiences were similar or not and whether, as successful models, in the future they could be considered adoptable by other political parties in the same or other European countries. Comparing the last primary elections held at a national level and aimed at selecting the prime ministerial or presidential candidates, the paper focuses on three perspectives:

a) The origins and the political meaning of the adoption of primary elections.

Why have, since 2005, the major left-wing parties introduced this tool? Were primaries simply conceived as a method of leadership selection? Or were they adopted to bring citizens closer to politics? Or even to alter the internal balance in the establishment of the party?

b) The rules of the competition and the context in which the elections were held.

Was the definition of the rules unanimously agreed on or there were clashes within the party? Did the party use rules with strategic logic in order to direct the outcome of the selection? Were there institutes of guarantee ensuring the 'neutrality' of the party during the election campaign? Was the competition between the candidates effective?

c) The reasons and frames that politicians, journalists and commentators used to state in favour or against the adoption of primary elections, within the public debate.

Were the primary elections an event able to catch the attention of the entire media system? Did the public debate focus on similar issues in the two countries? Who took part in the debate? Was the opinion expressed on primaries usually positive or negative?

Owing to the transversal nature of the subject, answering these questions requires a diverse methodological approach. In particular: (a) Qualitative analysis of texts aimed to compare rules adopted in the two countries; (b) Content analysis of coverage concerning public debate on primary elections.

With regards to this second point, three national newspapers for each country were selected according to their readership and political orientation. They are: 'Le Figaro' (Right), 'Le Monde' (centre-Left), 'Libération' (Left) and 'Il Corriere della Sera' (centre), 'La Repubblica' (centre-Left), 'La Stampa' (centre)<sup>2</sup>. The period

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<sup>2</sup> In order to expand the corpus we are working on a forthcoming version of this article that will also take into account as sources 'Il Giornale' (Right) and 'L'Unità' (Left) in Italy and "Le Parisien" (centre-Right) and 'L'Humanité' (Left) in France.

analysed corresponds to eight weeks before the vote and one after. The unit of coding and analysis was the individual news item and the general sample amounted to 71 articles in France and 101 in Italy. Coverage tone was coded according to several indicators derived from NEPOCS coding standards (Esser, Strömbäck & De Vreese 2012). In particular, following the proposal of Lengauer et al. (2012, 195-197) two different dimensions were coded:

(a) The level of negative tonality of the story. This reports the overall tone of the story, allowing to understand whether the report 'convey[s] primarily a positive, negative, balanced or neutral impression of politics, political records, conditions or views'<sup>3</sup>.

(b) The level of conflict-centeredness of the story. This relates to a news item conveying primarily 'conflictual, consensus-centred or balanced impressions of politics, political records, conditions and views'<sup>4</sup>.

These two variables have four codes: negative (-1); balanced (0); positive (+1); neutral/not applicable (0). For each of these indicators, two further indexes were then calculated (range from -1 to +1). The 'Index of Coverage Tone' measures the level of positive or negative tone within the articles, while the 'Index of Conflict' the level of conflict of a news item.

#### 4. The origins and political significance of the introduction of primary elections in Italy and France

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the so-called 'Italian First Republic'<sup>5</sup>, a *highly fragmented party system* emerged in Italy and exacerbated the problems that most Italian parties had been experiencing with respect to mobilisation and participation. Furthermore, political personalization became a key feature of centre-right parties as leaders like Berlusconi (McDonnell 2013; Venturino 2010; 2007)<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, the collapse of the Italian Communist Party led the 'new left' to change both its institutional dimension and the type of relationship with its supporters. For these reasons, in addition to the inability of the left to find a solution to the problem of leadership selection, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, left-wing parties undertook an 'open process' aimed at the selection of candidates and leaders<sup>7</sup>.

Open primary elections were introduced in 2004 in several small towns to select left wing candidates for municipal elections. However, it is in 2005 that the centre-left understood the potential impact of this type of election. The first signal came from primaries organised in Apulia in order to select the candidate for regional elections. In fact, after the unexpected victory of a leftist candidate (Nichi Vendola) both in primary

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<sup>3</sup> «Indications of negative tonality are the framing of the story as political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, scepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment. Indications of positive tonality are depictions of political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment. If a report does not reflect indications of negative tonality or of positive tonality, then it has to be coded as 'neutral'». The coding instruction, concerning neutral items, is applied for the following variable too, in Lengauer et al. (2012, 195).

<sup>4</sup> «The conflict dimension refers to at least two-sided depictions of (attempts, initiation, completion of) dispute, disagreement, discordance, confrontation, clashing positions and views or controversy. The consensus dimension refers to at least two-sided depictions of (attempts, initiation, completion of) consensus, accordance, consonance, conformities, dispute settlements, agreement, willingness of cooperation, willingness to compromise, approval or reconciliation» (Lengauer et al. 2012, 196).

<sup>5</sup> This term is used for describing the Italian political situation during the period 1948-1993. In this phase, Italy was a consensual democracy, while from 1994 after the dramatic changes brought about by the end of the Cold War and the reform of the electoral system, Italy could be defined as a competitive democracy. For a detailed discussion about transformations of Italian Democracy, see Fabbrini (2009).

<sup>6</sup> This was also the case of Umberto Bossi, undisputed leader of the ethno-regionalist party Lega Nord (Northern League), Pierferdinando Casini, leader of the catholic party UDC, Unione di Centro (Union of the Centre) and Gianfranco Fini, leader of the right-wing party AN, Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance).

<sup>7</sup> The process of primary election was unknown in Italy until the Democrats of the Left had adopted in their statute a system of one member, one vote (Omov) to select their leader in 2001 elections.

against the front-runner supported by the dominant coalition of the main centre-left Italian party, and in general election against the incumbent right-wing president, the media strongly emphasised the advantages in terms of participation and mobilization that the leftist parties and leaders could gain by making use of primaries more regularly. The success of the candidate selected through primaries during regional elections contributed to increase the debate about these inclusive procedures. After this result, before the 2006 general elections, the left parties discussed the possibility of adopting the primary elections to select the candidate to premiership. At that time, however, the centre-left coalition already had a strong leader: Romano Prodi. He had formerly been president of the European Commission and had gained cross-party support within the coalition. Nevertheless, he had never been formally recognised as the leader of the party coalition. Rather, he was perceived as a very qualified candidate, although lacking of legitimacy from the parties. In situation like that, Prodi and the centre-left party elites found in the primary elections a way to legitimate its candidacy. They did so by providing him with legitimacy and support not only from the parties that had endorsed his candidacy but also from a larger basin of consensus. By making use of the open primary elections, and by allowing all citizens to express their preferences, the leftist parties (and Prodi) managed to overcome internal opposition. This process provided Prodi with a clear and official mandate.

The primary elections were held on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005 and were open to all the citizens who had officially subscribed to the 'left manifesto'. Participation was also subject to a one-euro symbolic fee. More than four million voters took part in the election, which gave rise to highly enthusiastic reactions from both the centre-left parties and the public opinion.

The success of this national primary vote had a number of consequences. First, from 2005 onwards the PD, Partito Democratico (Democratic Party)<sup>8</sup> officially adopted the primaries to select its party leaders: 2007 for Veltroni; 2009 for Bersani; and 2013 for Renzi (Pasquino 2009; Pasquino and Venturino 2010; Pasquino and Venturino 2014, forthcoming). Second, over the last ten years, more than 400 municipal candidates have been selected through the primaries (Venturino and Seddone 2013; Venturino 2011; Venturino and Pasquino 2009)<sup>9</sup>. Third, the tool of primaries has rapidly spread both vertically (it is indeed used to select candidates for the districts, regions and parliament) and horizontally (it has resulted in centre and right parties using primaries to select their candidates and leaders<sup>10</sup>).

After the 2005 primary, the second most important case regarding the choice of candidates to premiership<sup>11</sup> took place in 2012. On that occasion, the centre-left coalition was called on to select its candidate for the 2013 general elections. In this case, several elite members of the Democratic Party openly opposed the decision, asserting that Bersani should be declared the coalition leader outright and considering the primary process disadvantageous for the party. Furthermore, the PD statute clearly stated that the party leader is to be the only candidate for the premiership<sup>12</sup>. However, in July, Bersani – and the PD's national assembly – reaffirmed the decision of allowing other PD members to take part in the competition. The election was therefore announced. Together with Bersani, two other members of the elite of the party participated in the primary competition: Matteo Renzi, mayor of Florence, and Laura Puppato, regional councillor. In addition to the three PD candidates, Nichi Vendola, leader of Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, and Bruno Tabacchi, leader of Nuovo Centro Democratico, stated that they would run too. The 2012 primary elections acquired a very different meaning as opposed to 2005. In 2012, the centre-left was perceived as the 'right-holder' of the primaries. Therefore, the left felt the pressure by public opinion

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<sup>8</sup> Democratic Party is the main centre-left party in Italy, it has been founded in 2007 by the merging of the Democratic Left and the Daisy – Democracy and Freedom, the heirs of communist and catholic political culture. It is necessary to underline that the birth of the party has been celebrated by an open primary election aimed to select the new party leader.

<sup>9</sup> For further information please refer to Candidate and Leader Selection website.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, several local candidates has been selected through open primary elections by the centre-right coalition in municipal elections; the 5 Star Movement adopted this procedure in order to select its candidates for national parliament both in 2013 General Elections and 2014 European Elections; Northern League and Brothers of Italy (a right wing party) adopted closed primary election for select their leaders.

<sup>11</sup> It should be underlined that the Italian electoral law imposes to each party and coalition to declare in advance its Prime Minister candidate.

<sup>12</sup> On October 6th, the PD National Assembly amended the statute in order to allow other candidates from the party – besides the general secretary Bersani – to run for the upcoming primary elections.

to adopt this tool to select its candidate to prime minister. Furthermore, the economic crisis and the declining support for the technocratic government led by Monti, as well as the crisis of the Berlusconi's political image, caused the primaries to be framed in a new way. Primaries were now perceived as an event that could be useful to launching the general election campaign. In other words, involving supporters and members, primaries were looked at as the event that would lead the centre-left to winning the general elections. Comparatively speaking, the French case displays a number of similarities with the Italian one. However, there is one exception: the first open-primary election was held at national level in 2011, after that several closed-primaries within the PS and the Green party had taken place.

Since 1995 and the first designation of the presidential candidate by the PS members, primary elections have become an unavoidable form of leadership selection for the PS, but also for other parties, including the UMP. In 1995, the decision to organize a PS primary election followed the tensions in the process of organisation and the absence of a 'natural candidate'. Indeed, Michel Rocard and Jacques Delors were either out ruled or denied to become official candidates. The decision of organising primary elections was criticised by a large number of leading figures of the party. For instance, Ségolène Royal, who would have exploited this new tool of leadership selection eleven years later, encouraged the militants to cast blank or invalid votes in order to make public their opposition to this internal election (Lefebvre, 2011: 32). The combination of the lack of support and consensus to this procedure and a feeling of emergency resulted in a very brief two-week campaign. Finally, Lionel Jospin won against Henri Emmanuelli, thanks to a more effective image in public opinion polls. Thereby the process of mediatisation and personalization within the PS was triggered by the first primary election, which was organised by the party in 1995. This trend will be emphasised during the following primary elections. In 2002, Lionel Jospin had been the Premier Minister since 1997 and had launched his candidacy to the 2002 presidential election. The party members were not involved in this decision, since Jospin could enjoy a strong legitimacy due to his position as head of the government.

After the 2002 presidential election and Lionel Jospin's failure, who did not make it to the second round of the presidential election against the extreme-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen, the PS decided to hold again the intra-party primary election. On this occasion, the strength of the partisan alignments seemed to be lower, while party leaders, members and the media mostly focused on opinion polls, with the aim of backing up the candidate with the best chances to win the presidential election, which they had been losing since 1988. Ségolène Royal is the candidate who best exploited this new situation. By insisting on her independence and her position on the fringe of the party's elite, she developed a rhetoric, which would be amplified by numerous columnist and journalists. She stood as an alternative, claiming strong independence from the leftist ideological tradition. Paradoxically, the success of Ségolène Royal who won the primary first round with 60,62% of the votes (81,97% of the members participated in the elections) led to the weakening of the organization as the new candidate had bypassed the party networks and support.

Thereby, this event and the new primary election have further accelerated the process of presidentialisation of the PS, notwithstanding the parliamentary tradition of the institution. Polls and public opinion have become the main source of influence on the choices made by members and supporters. In 2006, the new PS's policy, which facilitates new registrations thanks to both the '20-euro membership' and the possibility of online subscribing, created a brand new situation. Indeed, these new members tend to rely on public opinion to a greater extent than they do on the party culture, with which they are not familiar yet. The culture of discussion within the institution has also tended to decline, especially when most of the new '20-euro militants' left the party less than a year after the primary election, proving that their enrolment was linked to the personal characteristics of the candidates and not to the desire to participate in a collective action inspired by partisan identification. The secretary of a Parisian local branch explained us that the directorate decided to stop debates during the monthly meetings in order to preserve peace in the party organization during the campaign. Simultaneously, the fact that socialists would rally towards a more personalised institution has contributed to the blurring of the historical and ideological pillars. In other words, the primary election has weakened the members' role and influence, while it has strengthened the electoral function, to the detriment of the social and militant roles of the institution. This evolution would definitively be confirmed in 2011 and would lead to the organization of an open-primary election.

Regarding the organisation of open-primaries elections, the French and Italian cases share lots of features. In both cases, the media played an important role in the promotion and legitimation of this new form of leadership selection. In both countries, open-primary elections have been considered by the parties, which made use of them, as a new way to gain electoral and democratic support and to further strengthen their action on the political field. The organisation procedure of the primaries has been very similar too. In both countries, the success of this new type of (s)election created a domino effect, forcing other parties to consider primaries as an alternative to their traditional *modus operandi*. The main right-wing party in France, the UMP, has recently organised an intra-party vote to designate its new general secretary, Jean-François Copé. The next step could be an open-primary for the 2017 presidential election if the tensions between Copé and his main opponent, François Fillon, continue to mount.

## 5. The election rules and the context in which the last primaries were held.

In both countries, the 2012 (Italy) and 2011 (France) open primary elections have been an important popular success. The rules of these elections have been quite similar and nearly the same number of citizens participated. It is thereby very interesting to observe that in two different countries, similar leadership selection techniques have been implemented, with very similar effects, the most important of which probably is the redefinition of the meaning of political participation and the introduction of a new way to gain legitimacy.

Approaching the 2013 general elections – after the appointment of the Monti cabinet that replaced a Berlusconi-led government – the left coalition decided to hold open primary elections in the autumn of 2012 to select their candidate for premiership. The election would consist of a two-round system with a run-off between the two front-runners if no candidate secured more than 50% of the vote. The primary campaign was characterised by the constitution, on 13 October, of a centre-left coalition, named ‘Italia. Bene Comune’, and by the presentation of a common political platform, called the ‘Pact of Democrats and Progressives’. The coalition consisted of the Democratic Party (PD), Left Ecology Freedom (SEL) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI).

Three steps were required to anyone who was intending to participate in the primaries as voters: the pre-registration to the centre-left coalition, the donation of two euros and the endorsement of the coalition charter of values. The Guarantee Committee scrutinised the candidates and allowed five of them to run in the primaries after collecting the signatures of 20,000 people. Three of them were from the Democratic Party: the incumbent Secretary Pierluigi Bersani, the mayor of Florence Matteo Renzi and the Regional Councillor of Veneto Laura Puppato. Other than the PD runners, there was the SEL President Nichi Vendola and the MP and member of the New Alliance for Italy party, Bruno Tabacchi (Gelli et. Al. 2013).

Bersani started his campaign being viewed as the front-runner. As a matter of fact, he had been able to gather the support of nearly all of the democrats around his incumbent party<sup>13</sup>. His leadership was quickly challenged by the principal competitor Renzi a skilled communicator who embodied in the public debate the role of “anti-establishment”<sup>14</sup> candidate. His action was mostly aimed at renewing the Italian left. As a matter of fact, the contrast between the two principal candidates was about the rule about the pre-registration, which was opposed by Renzi because it was feared to reduce the turnout and favour the party apparatus and its official candidate. The conflict on the rules shows that by changing the rule itself, the party risks losing the control over the process of candidate and leader selection. The two candidates also discussed their different political platforms: moderate social-liberalism for Renzi and a mainstream social-democratic programme for Bersani. The other three candidates placed themselves close to Bersani's

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<sup>13</sup> Bersani received about 90% endorsements of the over 300 PD MPs.

<sup>14</sup> Renzi reached public relevance at national level in 2009. He ran (and won) primary elections organised in Florence for select the candidate at municipal elections. His primary election campaign was characterised for antiparty rhetoric blaming, in particular, his own party. The criticism against the party elite earned him the evocative surname of “scraper” (Seddone, 2011). He continued to play the role of outsider within his own party even after his victory at municipal elections, claiming to aim at the renewal of the PD and more in general at the renewal of the whole Italian political system.



programme, disputing in particular Renzi's approach. A televised debate among the five candidates was broadcast on SKY and was watched by over 1.5 million viewers. In November, votes were cast in an open primary attended by 3,110,210 voters, but no candidate acquired 50% of the votes. The two with the highest numbers of votes, Bersani and Renzi, took part in the second round, but Renzi's campaign was still focused on the 'rules of the game'. Although the pre-registration rule prohibited voting in the second round if voters had not registered before the first round had taken place, Renzi has raised the issue of the rules again, encouraging his supporters who had not voted in the first round to participate in the run-off. Despite this critical position, the two competitors took part in a second TV debate on public television, where the rules were left out. Renzi gave the impression of a greater familiarity with communication, but Bersani retained his leadership in the final polls. In fact, in December's second round, Bersani gained 60.9% of the 2,802,382 votes.

In France, the 2011 open primary election set a new step in the presidentialisation and the marginalization of intra-party democracy within the PS. In 2011, the voting conditions during the PS open-primary election were simple: citizens had to be registered to electoral rolls; they had to pay a small contribution to the organization and had to sign a charter to assert their full support to left-wing values. How can we then explain the choice of an open-primary election to designate the candidate in 2011? Rémi Lefebvre proposes two types of explanations (Dupoirier 2007). The first reason can be classified under the label of 'external causes', and refers to the influence exerted by actors who do not belong to the party (reporters, intellectuals and several outsiders in the party who have considered primaries as a way to climb in the organization's hierarchy). For example, 'Libération' and 'Le Nouvel Observateur' had been strong defenders of the organization of open-primary elections. At the end of March 2009, Laurent Joffrin, editorialist at 'Libération', wrote: 'We have to face the facts. The way parties designate their candidates is over'. This is why the left-wing people chose with wisdom this system of primary elections, which appointed Prodi and above all Obama. The caciques have to understand this evolution' (Lefebvre, 2011: 67). In other words, the context and the support of this system of designation from actors who do not belong to the organization but who managed to have an influence on the party, have played a major role.

Alternatively, 'internal causes' may have played a role too. After the two defeats in 2002 and 2007, no strong leader managed to stand out. Furthermore, the party was regularly the scene of conflicts between party leaders (Martine Aubry, François Hollande, Manuel Valls, Arnaud Montebourg, Ségolène Royal). As a result, the primary elections were considered as a way to mitigate these tensions and to pacify the party. On October 1st, 2009, 68% of the party members voted for the organization of open-primary elections. Two years later, 2,800,000 citizens participated in the designation of the presidential candidate. François Hollande won the primary elections with ca. 57% of the votes against 43% for the party general secretary, Martine Aubry. For PS leaders, the 2011 primary elections were a real success. Arnaud Montebourg, a former candidate, declared: 'These primary elections are a success. It is an innovation that enables an unstoppable return of the citizens into the political sphere. We are done with the locking of political parties'<sup>15</sup>. After the results, Harlem Désir, vice-general secretary of the PS, praised the primary elections: "It is, of course, an historical success and I'd like to share with you the pride of the socialist party. We have succeeded to combine the mobilization of citizens with the efficiency of the organization and the entire transparency of the results"<sup>16</sup>. Most newspapers and editorialists also praised the primary elections. In a country with a weak tradition of political participation - less than 1% of the French population is member of a party (Offerlé, 2010) – and where only 15 % of the French declare that they trust political parties (Déloye, 2012), the strong participation during this election can be considered as a success for the PS and as a way to hamper the so-called 'crisis of democracy'. However, we can also consider that this episodic participation mobilizes only the citizens who are mostly politicised. Finally, for the PS, holding open-primary elections leads to a situation where the party increasingly becomes a hybrid organization, which is torn between its historical tradition of activism and the opening of its internal organisation and deliberative tradition.

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<sup>15</sup> See: Barotte, N. and Bourmaud, F., 'Arnaud Montebourg, le nouvel homme fort', *Le Figaro*, 9 October 2011.

<sup>16</sup> See: 'Plus de 2,5 millions de votants à la primaire : la "fierté du PS"', [lci.tf1.fr/politique/primaire-ps-plus-de-2-5-millions-de-votants-6756675.html](http://lci.tf1.fr/politique/primaire-ps-plus-de-2-5-millions-de-votants-6756675.html).

## 6. Adversarial but positive: public debate on primary elections

As previously mentioned, in both countries Left parties have adopted primary elections in response to the crisis of public trust in political parties. In general, they have mainly used them as a means of (re) legitimization of the party and promotion of the candidates. However, by analysing the public debate, it is possible to better investigate how political actors and journalists state about the adoption of primary elections.

The analysis of newspapers' coverage, during the eight weeks leading up to the vote and the one after it, revealed that the Italian media system covered the election of 2012 giving more attention than the French media system did in 2011: 106 articles compared to 71 (tab. 1). This data is coherent with previous comparisons showing that in Italy more space is systematically dedicated to politics according to the general organization of the newspapers (Bobba, 2011; Saitta, 2009). When compared with the total number of political articles, the coverage on French primary elections, although limited in absolute numbers, shows that almost 3.4 per cent of the French political coverage focused on primaries. While, in Italy, the same indicator reaches lower values: 2.3 per cent. The visibility of this kind of election is then higher in Italy, while, in both countries, the political debate appears scarcely concerned by primaries, except for within the very final phase of the campaign.

Figure 1 shows that, as a whole, the two systems covered the elections following a similar pattern. In both countries there is a prevalence of news about disputes, mutual accusations and conflicts that concern not only the Left field but also the Right one (the value of the index was 0.20 for France, 0.22 for Italy). However, on average, primary elections were not depicted as 'negative': the French case displays a neutral frame (0.01), while in Italy the coverage is more biased in a positive direction (0.3).

More differences emerge in relation to other specific features, namely (a) the political orientation of the newspaper (tab. 2) and (b) the visibility accorded to different points of views and reasons that politicians, journalists and commentators use for or against the introduction of primary elections (tab. 3).

Firstly, the more interested newspapers appear to be those who oppose or do not support the Left: 'Il Corriere della Sera' and 'Le Figaro' show the higher number of articles. For both, data about the conflict-centeredness of coverage does not differ greatly from the national average, while the index of negativity they reached is the highest score for each country. 'Il Corriere' displays a small positive value (0.18) as the result of a fairly balanced debate that gave voice to positions for and against primaries. The index for 'Le Figaro' is instead highly negative (-0.30), since, following its conservative editorial line, it strongly covered the point of views against Left primaries.

Secondly, 'Le Monde' and 'la Repubblica' focused mainly on the adversarial dimension of the competition. The Italian newspaper highlighted, in particular, the disputes between Renzi, 'the Scrapper', Bersani, the leader of the PD, and other long time members within the PD establishment. The French paper covered more in depth disputes and conflicts involving the PS candidates (Hollande, Aubry, Royal, Montebourg, Valls) and their respective teams more so than 'Le Figaro' and 'Libération'. However, while 'Le Monde' maintained a certain balance in the frames through which it covered the election, 'la Repubblica' openly showed its support for the primaries and the centre-Left.

Thirdly, 'Libération' and 'La Stampa' are characterized by an intermediate result. The French newspaper covered the election in a fairly neutral way (neither divisive nor positive) and it simply did not appear very involved in the debate. The Italian newspaper instead showed a strong positive frame that contributed in guiding the Italian debate in favour of the primaries.

Moreover, in both countries the conflict-centeredness index appears to be more significant when political actors are involved (tab. 3). For the Left and the Right, primary elections have been a moment of internal and external confrontation. While for the Left-wing parties – organizers of the primaries – disputes coincided with the most critical periods of the campaign, for right-wing parties we detected what could be called a 'contagion effect'. In the Berlusconi party, the PDL, Popolo della Libertà (People of the Freedom) and in the UMP party, MPs argued about the desirability of adopting the primary election for the right. In

Italy, after the resignation of Berlusconi and his (temporary) retirement in October 2011, the right field lacked a strong leader. The new secretary of the PDL, Angelino Alfano, in the midst of the election campaign for the primaries of the Left, in November 2012, decided to hold primaries too in order to select their right-wing candidate. The decision of Berlusconi to return to political life resulted in the cancellation of the event a few weeks before it was to take place. In France, the presence of a 'natural candidate', as the incumbent president Nicolas Sarkozy, limited the debate, although there were several clashes between those in favour of the primaries as Jean-François Copé (head of the UMP) and François Fillon (Prime Minister) and those opposed to primaries, as was Sarkozy<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, a last point to be noticed is the difference between journalists and experts. In Italy both of them contributed to frame the debate on primary elections in a positive way, stressing aspects such as the novelty and the democratic nature of the event. On the contrary, French journalism was rather neutral, while the experts who wrote on the subject emphasized negative aspects such as the demagogic nature of this election and the risks related to the personalization of party politics.

**Tab. 1 Visibility of primaries elections within the coverage of the three main newspapers in France and Italy**

	N	N of articles on primaries (avg per day)	N of articles on politics (avg per day)	Ratio (%)
France	71	0.4	10.9	3.4
Le Figaro	27	0.4	12.3	3.5
Le Monde	26	0.4	9.6	4.3
Libération	18	0.3	10.9	2.6
Italy	106	0.6	24.1	2.3
Corriere della Sera	45	0.7	27.2	2.6
La Repubblica	29	0.5	19.2	2.4
La Stampa	32	0.5	25.9	2.0

**Tab. 2 Primaries election coverage of the three main newspapers in France and Italy**

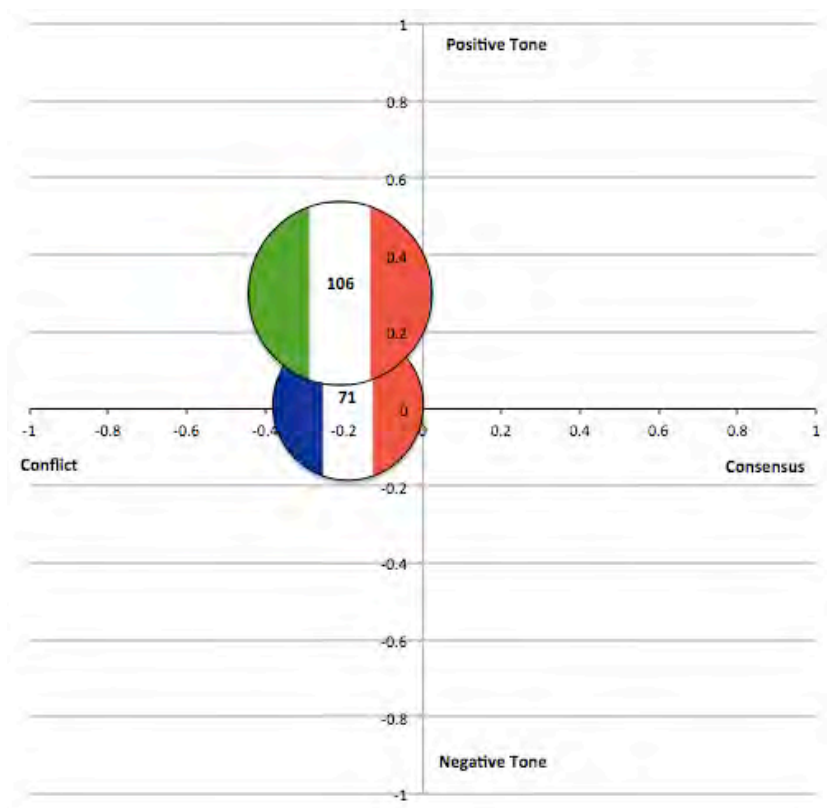
	Index of Conflict	Index of Coverage Tone
France	-0.20	0.01
Le Figaro	-0.15	-0.30
Le Monde	-0.27	0.23
Libération	-0.17	0.17
Italy	-0.22	0.30
Corriere della Sera	-0.22	0.18
La Repubblica	-0.31	0.48
La Stampa	-0.13	0.31

<sup>17</sup> See for example: 'À droite, l'idée fait son chemin pour 2017', *Le Figaro*, 8 October 2011.

**Tab. 3 Points of views of actors involved in the primary elections coverage in France and Italy**

	N	Index of Conflict	Index of Coverage Tone
France	71	-0.20	0.01
Centre-Left Politicians	20	-0.30	0.40
Centre-Right Politicians	18	-0.28	-0.33
Journalists	24	-0.13	0.08
Commentators	9	0.00	-0.33
Italy	106	-0.22	0.30
Centre-Left Politicians	37	-0.38	0.38
Centre-Right Politicians	9	-0.33	0.22
Journalists	39	-0.15	0.23
Commentators	21	0	0.30

**Fig. 1. Primaries elections within the public debate**



A last important point to be highlighted regards the way the two systems covered the debate on primary elections respectively following three dimensions: (a) the public image of the party/coalition; (b) the public image of the candidates; (c) the potential impact of primaries on the national political field, in general, and on party election performances, in particular.

The debate in France was mainly focused on the public image of the party (N=53), while other dimensions were more poorly covered. In Italy there was a greater balance between these three dimensions. The image of the party (N = 50), together with articles on the consequences of the primaries (N = 54), prevailed with respect to the image of the candidates (N=35). However, beside the quantitative dimension, the most significant differences related to the contents.

(a) The public image of the PS was neutral or, given the opposing positions of the French newspapers, it would be more correct to say 'balanced'. As previously mentioned, 'Le Figaro' mainly covered critical points of views about primaries and even more on the Socialists. Typical articles dealt with the weakness of the leadership and the fragmentation of the party, they stressed problems in the organization or tried to minimize the extent of participation<sup>18</sup>. 'Le Monde' and 'Libération' coverage was more focused on electoral events, reportage among party members and comments were generally less critical of the choice of adopting primaries<sup>19</sup>. In Italy, the image of the party was, at the same time, rather more positive and more confrontational than in France. All newspapers emphasized in a positive light the party's ability to stimulate the democratic participation of citizens through the primaries. However there were also several occasions – primarily triggered by Matteo Renzi – in which the internal quarrel of the PD was the main topic of the articles on the primary election campaign<sup>20</sup>.

(b) The point where the two systems were more differentiated was the coverage of the candidates (fig. 3). While in France the common feature was the competition between the different currents of the party and their leaders, in Italy the public image of candidates was positive and – surprisingly – not associated with conflicts or disputes. This happened because the three main candidates – Bersani, Renzi and Vendola – actually implemented a strategy of mutual respect looking to minimize personal involvement in disputes. So, for example during the two scheduled TV debates there were never hard exchanges of accusations between the participants<sup>21</sup>. On the contrary, before the second round, strong disputes took place between Hollande and Aubry to the extent that the 'High Authority for Primaries' of the PS party had to intervene to restore calm<sup>22</sup>.

(c) Primaries in the Italian public debate were interpreted as a solution to the distance between citizens and politics, in general, and to their distrust of political parties, in particular. The three newspapers analysed covered the election in an overall positive manner, albeit with some nuances. Moreover, due to a very fragmented and completely in disarray centre-right, the result of the primary elections was often associated with the PD success at the subsequent 2013 general elections. As shown in Figure 4, in the French case, this last dimension reflected the highest level of conflict between the Left and the Right, who had been opposed since the definition of leftist candidates. In some ways, this election anticipated and extended the boundaries of the 2012 presidential election campaign. While, at first, only the second line of the UMP party were involved, once the success of participation was clear, the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, personally criticised and attacked his potential challengers<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> See: A. Zennou, 'Reynié : "La primaire révèle a faiblesse idéologique du PS"', *Le Figaro*, 7 October 2011; 'L'UMP minimise le succès de la participation. Copé a fait valoir hier que seuls "quatre Français sur cent sont allés voter"', *Le Figaro*, 10 October 2011.

<sup>19</sup> See: 'Bonheurs et déboires d'une journée de vote inédite. De Lille à Marseille, de Bouliac à Saint-Germain-des-Champs, les électeurs ont fait le choix d'assumer publiquement leur engagement à gauche en se rendant aux urnes tenues par le PS, *Le Monde*, 11 October 2011; M. Semo, 'La primaire ne signifie pas la fin des partis mais leur mutation', *Libération*, 13 October 2011.

<sup>20</sup> See: U. Rosso, 'Veltroni dà la scossa al Pd. Dico addio al Parlamento. E attacca su Monti cancellato', *la Repubblica*, 15 October 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See: M. Cruccu, 'Primarie del centrosinistra, un quieto dibattito', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 13 November 2012.

<sup>22</sup> See: Aubry et Hollande rappelés à l'ordre par la Haute autorité des primaires, *Le Monde*, 14 October 2011

<sup>23</sup> See: 'Nicolas Sarkozy critique la primaire PS', *Le Figaro*, 11 October 2011.

Fig. 2 The public image of the party within the public debate

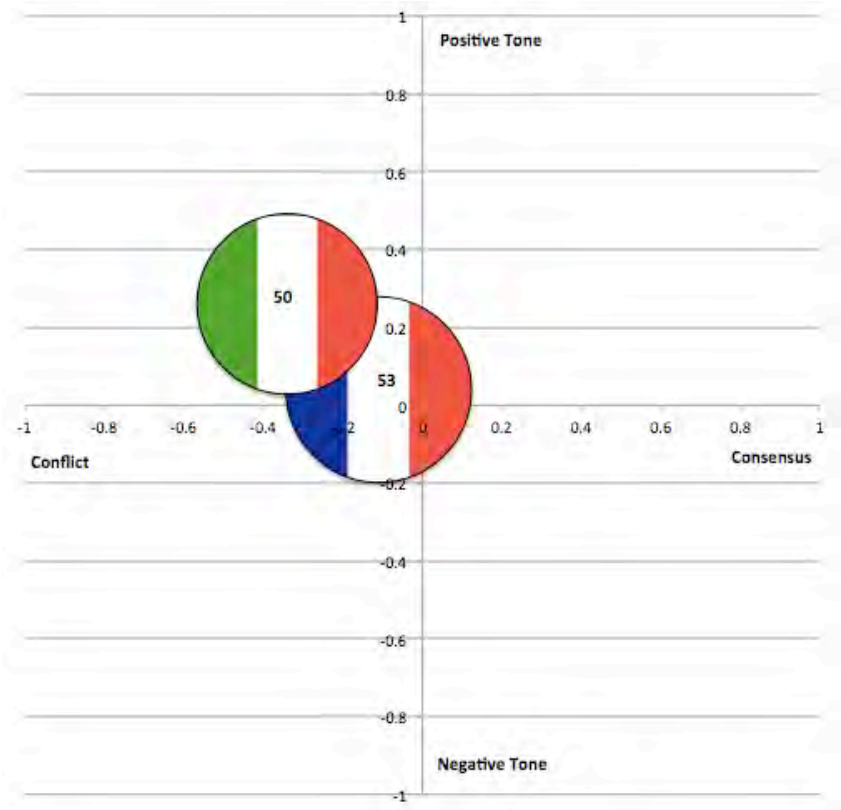
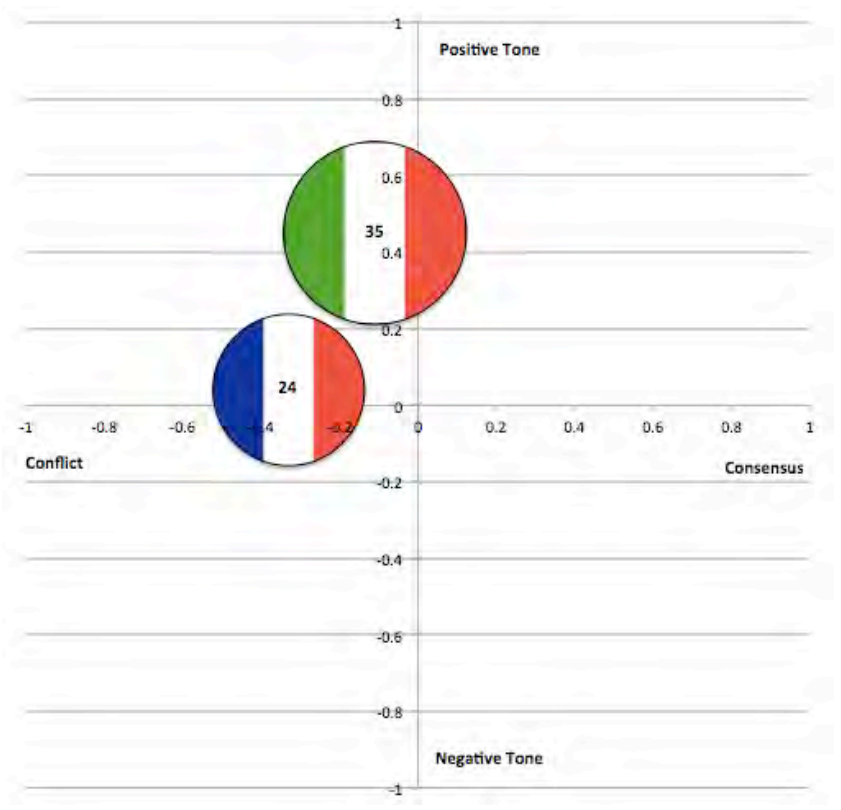
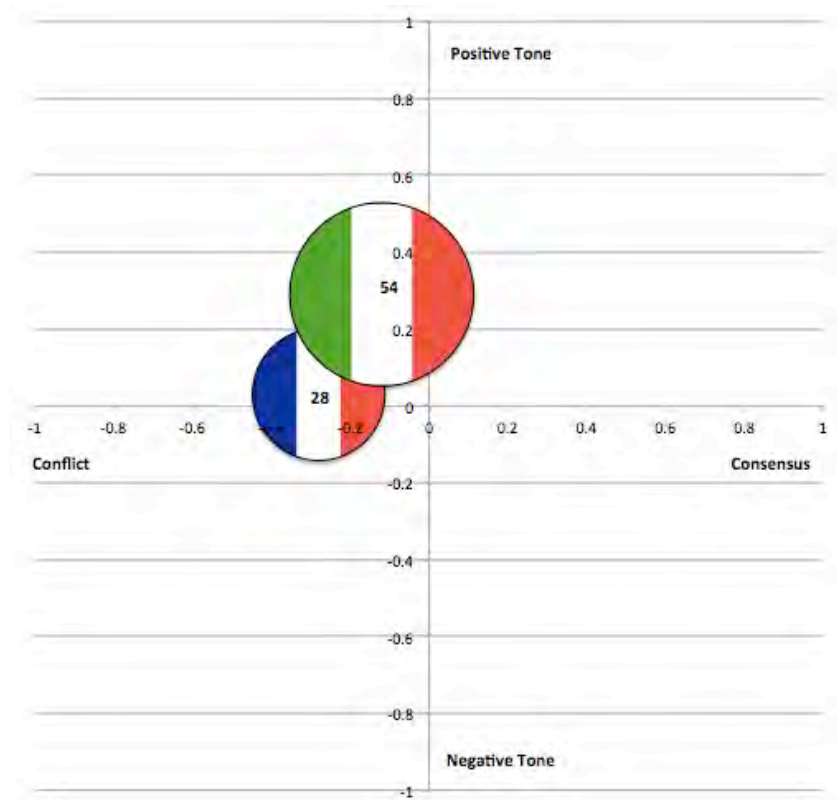


Fig. 3 The public image of candidates within the public debate



**Fig. 4 Consequences of primaries elections within the public debate**



## Conclusion

Having presented the emergence of open primary elections in France and Italy, some general trends and features concerning this particular kind of elections can now be summed up.

First, the inclusiveness related to the concept of primaries has become crucial for parties knocked down by antiparty and anti-politics feelings. One of the main reasons why primaries have been adopted by the PD and the PS parties is that they are an effective tool for renewing the relationship of trust with their respective members and voters. Moreover, in both cases, a second reason was crucial: the lack of strong leadership within these two parties, in a political context where elections and politics have been increasingly personalized. In this perspective, primaries are not only instruments of participation, but also a way of legitimizing a candidate from the bottom.

Secondly, since French and Italian open primary elections don't have any institutional recognition, their regulation may be amended arbitrarily by the party in order to keep under control the result of the selection. These 'private' primary elections assured a very strict control of political parties within the competition. As we have seen, in both countries rules of participation and candidacy were changed and these changes affected the competition among candidates: in 2007 Royal won thanks to the 'PS 20-euros members', while Bersani's victory in 2012 was assured by the two-round electoral system. This interpretation goes by the way of Katz and Mair (1995) suggestions about primary elections and the role of party leadership. They suggest that primaries could be a strategy used by party's élites in order to free themselves from the control of the party's intermediate bodies (Katz and Mair 1994). Behind the inclusiveness of these elections, party's élites would aim to weaken the power of members and intermediate élites have in ruling the party life, by giving power to less active subjects who are less involved in formal party life and consequently less interested in controlling the élites conduct. In other words,

despite the label of internal democratization, primary elections may entail the risk of greater centralization of the power and control of the party by the leader and his staff.

Thirdly, with regards to the public debate, we found that in both countries primaries were not able to monopolize the political coverage, except for the last few days before the vote or on the occasion of TV debates. Nevertheless, this part of the analysis has highlighted the main differences between the two cases. In Italy, the centre-left's primaries were mainly depicted in a positive way and most of the actors involved in the debate considered them a solution to reconnect citizens with politics. The high voter turnout produced a contagion effect on the centre and right-wing parties. Some of them have taken on primary elections – open or not – to select their MP candidates (Movimento 5 Stelle, Five Star Movement), others to select the party leader (Northern League), and others simply announced the elections, which were never held (PDL). The French case is instead characterized by a more balanced discussion in which political affiliation determines the direction of the judgment: *Le Figaro* covered the primaries with a very negative and conflictual frame, while *Le Monde* and *Libération* were more positive. However, even in France the successful voter turnout induced the leading exponents of the UMP to state in favour or against this kind of election, which produced an internal debate between supporters and opponents. It is again a sort of contagion effect which, unlike the Italian case, did not lead to the organization of any elections, but instead, put into question their political significance.

Finally, the evidences from the two case studies show that the decision to organise primary elections depends mainly on national and intra-partisan factors. Therefore it seems difficult to establish if other parties, in other countries, could adopt this mechanism of selection. For instance, in the German case, the strength of the main political parties (the SPD and the CDU parties claim approximately 470 000 members each) seems to be an obstacle to the organisation of primary election. However, and for the first time in the German history, the Green Party has organised a closed primary election to select his candidate. In this case, like in the Italian and French ones, the absence of a strong and recognized leader in the party has pushed the party to adopt this system.

Therefore, the comparison reveals some features that seem to be prerequisites for the adoption of this type of election: a general crisis of trust in political parties; the absence of a 'natural' candidate combined, at the same time, with a very structured party organization, and a culture of militant participation, with possible connexion to the civil society. Besides these conditions, however, the spread of this method of selection also depend on the success that the primaries themselves ensure to the party organizer, both in terms of public image and electoral performance. If, in the next years, the PD and the PS will succeed at the national level, it is likely that other parties in Europe will decide to adopt the primary elections. Moreover, and unlike the American case, open primary elections in Europe appear not only as an inclusive process for selecting of candidates, but also as an useful tool to renew the party image. However, primary elections do not guaranty long-term legitimacy, or a durable popularity. The chaotic mandate of the first French president designated through this procedure, François Hollande, and the failed attempt to form a government by the designated leader of the PD, Pier Luigi Bersani, prove that primary elections have a short-term effect on the tolerance of critical citizens towards political elites.



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